



Whose
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By Krin Van Tatenhove

Preface

As a pastor for 23 years, I've been considered "theologian in residence" for numerous congregations. I wear that mantle uneasily, Bible in one hand, a newspaper in the other. On the Bible side of things, I don't claim to be a scholar who can easily synthesize the Bible's unity. So many parts of scripture are incongruous with the God of love I am growing to know.

How about the flush of the original Petri dish called "the flood." Or the elaborate butchering details in Leviticus—ensuring that God received appeasing prime cuts. Or the divinely authorized genocide found in Joshua, God "requiring" the annihilation of every living thing in Jericho and other cities? Or David, a "man after God's own heart," invoking his nationalistic Deity against tribes that had already endured enough Israelite brutality?

If I had lived during the time of Marcion, I think I would have adopted his delimited view of the Old Testament God. I think I would have joined his "heretical" movement.

Even in the New Testament, I cringe at many passages, such as Jesus saying, "...at the end of the age...the Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Matthew 13: 41-42)

Yet when I tempted to despair, I am captivated by Jesus' words from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." I hear him say, "It is finished," and in that instant, I see the fullness of the incarnation, the miraculous outpouring of grace for every person on the planet.

So...as regards Biblical passages on the issue of homosexuality, I defer to scholars such as the late John Boswell, or Jack Rogers, who recently updated his landmark volume, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*.

The conversion of my heart that I share in these pages is rooted in my understanding of scripture. However, it is ultimately a result of the *ongoing revelation* of personal experience guided by the Holy Spirit. It is, I believe, a

partnership with the God who is “in process” in my life and the lives of countless others.

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My Conversion

It's 1978, the ninth anniversary of the Stonewall riots, an event many call ground zero for the gay rights movement. California is debating a constitutional amendment to ban gays and lesbians from teaching in public schools. Labeled the Briggs Initiative because of its sponsor—conservative legislator, John Briggs—it is an attempt to import Anita Bryant's gay-bashing campaign called *Save Our Children*. Opposition to the initiative galvanizes a broad-based coalition. Among them is San Francisco Supervisor, Harvey Milk, who utters these famous words at the city's '78 Gay Pride Parade.

My name is Harvey Milk, and I want to recruit you. I want to recruit you for the fight to preserve democracy from the John Briggs and Anita Bryants who are trying to constitutionalize bigotry...

On this anniversary of Stonewall, I ask my gay sisters and brothers to make the commitment to fight. For themselves, for their freedom, for their country...Gay people, we will not win our rights by staying silently in our closets...We are coming out. We are coming out to fight the lies, the myths, the distortions. We are coming out to tell the truths about gays, for I am tired of the conspiracy of silence, so I'm going to talk about it. And I want you to talk about it. You must come out. Come out to your parents, your relatives.

Come out, come out, wherever you are!

Here's my question: whose closet is it? Who really needs to come out? I'll tell you the answer that is now clear to me. **I do**; I and countless others I've met who hide silently, hypocritically in our closets to avoid conflict, to keep the peace in our homes and churches.

So today I am coming out in full support of gay rights. I am now a wholehearted advocate of ordination for the LGBT community within my denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA). I am coming out in solidarity with all grassroots political movements that will one day ensure legal marriage

for LGBT people across this great country.

Some of you might say, “So what?” Or “It’s about time.”

Points well taken. But believe me: as a pastor in conservative, small town, south Texas (people I love!), this is a risk. Perhaps miniscule in your eyes, but a risk nonetheless.

Why now? Because, as an advocate for other social concerns—immigration rights, homeless services, racial equality, economic and environmental justice—I have called from the pulpit for prophetic zeal. I have asked people to stand up and be counted. It is why I hang my hat with a Christian denomination that has always been on the forefront of *La Lucha*. It’s time for my personal zeal to include my LGBT brothers and sisters.

Why now? Because, by allowing the politics of expediency to muzzle me, I have not been true to my calling. I have contributed to a conspiracy of silence. A particular quote from Martin Luther King, Jr. haunts me: *In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.*

Why now? Because I am overjoyed to learn once again that sanctification is an ongoing process. It makes me dance inside to know that this journey into deeper love and acceptance will continue until the day I meet the Lord face to face!

In a way, I find it ironic that it took me so long to come out. I’ve never had a homophobic bone in my body. As a teenager, I ran with a crowd that included both bisexual and gay friends. David was part of that pack. The two of us shared so much in common—a love for art, literature, film, and philosophy. Who else would pore over passages of Conrad, Dostoyevsky, or Faulkner with me? Who else would relish seeing a mint print of D.W. Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms* at the L.A. County Art Museum? Who else would thrill to the opening of a Max Ernst exhibition? Who else would discuss how existentialism was a perfect foil for the spoon-fed Christianity of our youth?

As our relationship continued into college, I decided to spend a summer with David in The Haight District of San Francisco. I had a singular intent, a clear question to explore: was I holding back from a sexual relationship with him because of my basic orientation, or because of internalized social taboos?

That relationship came to a mutual end as both of us realized we were incompatible on a sexual level. But my time in the gay culture of San Francisco

conscientized me. It helped me see that homophobia is as institutionalized as sexism and racism, a systemic evil that has harmed countless individuals. And since this was the pre-AIDS era of bathhouse debauchery, I saw how the internalized shame of homophobia drove some gay people to self-degradation.

This experience gave me a sort of “badge of courage.” I had been unafraid to explore the wider spectrum of sexuality, so no one could tell me I was homophobic. Indeed, I had a number of close gay friends over the years, which I pointed to as proof that I was “tolerant” and “inclusive.”

So how did I come to oppose LGBT ordination and gay marriage? My rationales may seem false and narrow-minded to many of you, but this is *my* story. If we can’t listen to each other fully, how can we find a way forward?

First of all, I saw a trend which I called “a widening of the gate.” The term “gay community” became the initialism LGBT to include bisexual and transgender individuals. Frankly, I had a lot of questions in the midst of a culture which I felt was already sexually confused.

If a pastor were to pursue an active bisexual lifestyle, wasn’t this just a cover for multiple partners and self-gratification? How could this be a healthy example to a congregation, including youth so full of questions?

If the LGBT community claimed God created them this way, what about transgender folks who wanted to *change* the way God created them? I had only a handful of encounters with transgender individuals, and my limited experience showed me that none of them were well-adjusted. (I’m sorry to say this...)

I came to believe that accommodation to the LGBT coalition equaled acquiescence to post-modern moral relativism. Just as traditional absolutes of Christian theology were being “debunked” by emergent voices, so too were the morals closely associated with sexual behavior and marriage. I was not against full civil rights for gay people, but I felt that when it came to ordination, a different standard was justifiable. Justifiable to protect what I called the “mystery” of heterosexual marriage, an integral part of God’s creation plan.

I know these arguments sound standard and outmoded to anyone who has debated this issue, but let me share a moment when they (unfortunately) became more firmly rooted in me.

Following Bill Clinton’s egregious abuse of a young intern—*part of which*

took place in the oval office!—I witnessed a heart-rending incident. I was teaching junior high classes in a Christian middle school. Part of our daily routine was to pass out newspapers, clip out an article, then take a moment to verbally summarize it to the class. I came up next to a student I greatly admired for his intelligence and insight. He had a picture of Clinton in his hands and was slowly shredding it with his scissors. When he saw the quizzical expression on my face, he just shook his head and muttered, “White trash.”

When I shared this with some of my liberal friends, asking them to ponder the damage done to the office of the presidency, they just clucked and gave me easy answers like these.

“Everyone needs forgiveness.”

“What happens in your private life has no bearing on your public performance.”

“So what, the man has some sexual problems; he’s still a brilliant politician.”

But listen, these were the very same people quick to crucify conservative preachers or politicians caught in similar indiscretions. To me, here was the subtext: *excuse, even embrace behaviors that jibe with your subjective worldview, but disregard objective moral imperatives*. Again, I saw this as a capitulation to relativism.

Second of all, it felt like our denomination was being hijacking by a small minority and their “one-note” issue. Most Presbytery meetings during my career have been riddled with conflict over this issue of gay ordination. As I surveyed the neighborhoods around my churches, many of them in urban settings, I saw a host of what I felt were more pressing problems: crime, poverty, homelessness, gang affiliation, drug and human trafficking. With so much energy spent on the issue of gay inclusion, I believed we were diluting our potency in fighting these other social ills.

I termed myself a moderate, intent on building bridges, but in our convocations, I watched friends on both sides polarize into *true believers*, letting this single issue tear them apart. Despite all our lip service to *unity in our diversity*, the fabric of our faith community was rending.

This was especially true in the San Fernando Presbytery when Jack Rogers, a member of that Presbytery, had his own “coming out” in support of

gay ordination. I remember thinking that if non-Christians endured the endless hours of our corporate contentiousness they would flee from the faith like animals from a forest wildfire.

Since I had carefully forged relationships with both conservatives and liberals in my congregation, Presbytery, and community, I did not want to damage the fragile truce. Even as my conscience began to change, I was reluctant to take a stand and throw my congregations into turmoil. Quite literally, the issue of LGBT ordination had become a litmus test as to whether you could be trusted on a whole host of other issues. This was true on both sides of the aisle.

The most shameful thing that happened to others—AND ME—during this time is that we substituted issues for living, breathing relationships with human beings. I had seen this before: God’s precious children—be they immigrants, addicts, prisoners, or the homeless—reduced to “types.”

So how did I get from there to here? I made a simple vow: I would seek out LGBT Christians and listen to their stories. Then I would listen some more. And some more... I would try as hard as possible to be a “table rasa,” opening my heart and mind to the “otherness” of their journeys. I would humbly admit that God still had a lot to teach me through the indwelling of the Counselor.

This journey culminated in a number of close relationships, both personal and professional. Over time, these new friends blessed me with the sacramental details of their journeys as gay Christians. So much of what I heard broke my heart...*Cruelty: verbal and physical violence to God’s children of another gender...Futile efforts to follow society’s norming script...Spiritually stunted churches practicing intolerance under a cloak of defending the faith...Second-class citizenship...A denial of God-given rights to fully utilize one’s spiritual gifts.*

But I also heard so much that filled me with love and hope...*devotion to Christ that was not destroyed by the ignorance of His church...people’s hearts converted by grace...congregations enlarging their ministries through love and grace...the light of the Spirit burning more brightly!*

I am so thankful. My LGBT brothers and sisters within the church have enlarged my capacity to love by their faith, their marriages, their family lives, and their service to Christ through His church. I am not idealizing anything here. All of us struggle. All of us fall short of what God intends for our lives. All

of us stumble at times. But when we do, let us stumble together, not in isolation!

So, in my own pragmatic terms, this is what I have learned. It is why I will encourage *everyone I can reach* to vote YES on Amendment 10-A to the Presbyterian Book of Order.

- Sexuality is on a continuum. Our need to make it a simple, binary equation does injustice to those created differently.
- People created with a different sexual orientation knew from their first dawning of self-consciousness that this was so. It was not a choice.
- Since people are created with different sexual orientations, how can we call someone else's genetic makeup a sin? I know, I know, because the Bible says so. Again, I refer to the scholars mentioned above. Read them! And remember that the Bible was not created through "automatic writing." It is the product of flawed human beings in touch with a portion of God's full revelation. Praise God that they transmitted what we have in hand, but we must read these texts in the context of history, culture, and human fallibility. We must read them through the ongoing revelation of the Holy Spirit in a church which is "reformed and always reforming."
- All struggles for justice are interrelated. There can be no real peace without justice. I am a liar if I defend the rights of the homeless or immigrants, but deny the rights of others in God's family.

I close with a heartfelt apology. I beg the forgiveness of my LGBT brothers and sisters. Forgive me for my complicity in the injustices you have faced. I pray that the grace in which we all stand will soften your hearts towards me and others who still struggle to live out the full meaning of our creeds. I pray that we will *all* continue to be the changes we want to see.

Viva la lucha!